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OCCUPYING THE COLLECTION

Videosphere: A New Generation

Albright-Knox Art Gallery

Buffalo

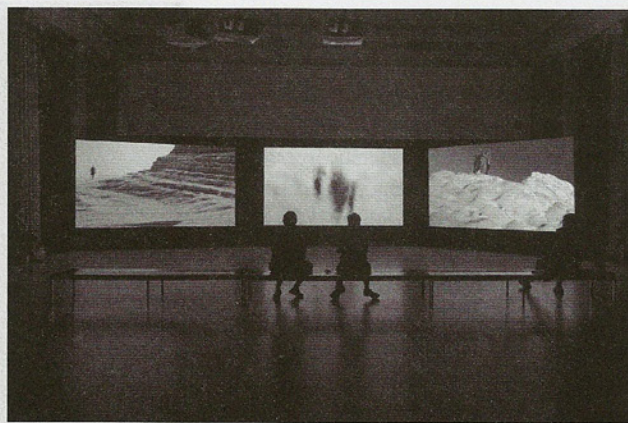
July 1–October 9, 2011

The first media art exhibition initiated by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in over a decade, “Videosphere: A New Generation” represented a significant achievement for Buffalo’s modern and contemporary art museum. The gallery last showcased time-based art in 1996, when it organized “Being & Time: The Emergence of Video Projection.” Curated by Marc Mayer, who today heads the National Gallery of Canada, the landmark exhibit included monumental installations such as Gary Hill’s “Tall Ships” (1992) and Bill Viola’s “The Greeting” (1995). Of the six artists featured in “Being & Time,” Bruce Nauman, Tony Oursler, and Viola reappeared among twenty-four artists represented in “Videosphere.”

Organized by Holly E. Hughes, Curator for the Collection, as neither a comprehensive survey nor an evaluation of emerging trends, “Videosphere” reflected the gallery’s efforts to bolster its collection of time-based art, works that it did not acquire until the 1990s. “Given its resonance with artists of recent generations,” Hughes writes, “this genre of work has become an increasingly integral component of strategies surrounding collections of contemporary art.”¹ Intergenerational and interdisciplinary, Hughes’s selection of works connected the creative impulses motivating the artists’ use of technology to longstanding aesthetic themes.

A rigorous project, “Videosphere” filled the museum’s second-floor galleries and also included recent media art acquisitions among the paintings and sculptures from its permanent collection on view in the 1962 Knox Building. John F. Simon Jr.’s *Endless Victory* (2005), a “real-time” or generative work driven by the artist’s computer code, was installed in proximity to the work of Piet Mondrian, whose unfinished painting *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942–44) served as inspiration. *Mod Lang* (2001), an abstract digital animation by Jeremy Blake, serves as a visualization of the late artist’s reverence for the masters of modernism looming close by. Removed from its implied, nonfigurative narrative, the work becomes riddled by its service to ambiance, reflecting a Rothko behind it.

A majority of the works on view in “Videosphere” were acquired after 2007, when the gallery de-accessioned objects from its collection to support an endowment for new purchases.² The



show was the debut for these acquisitions, including the earliest work on view, Nauman’s video installation “Green Horses” (1988).³ Thus, while many museums today are choosing to curate from within in order to reign in expenses, the Albright-Knox spared little to none when it launched “Videospheres,” choosing instead to reinvest in its collection by installing several monolithic acquisitions. Of the twenty-six works on view, I’ve focused my attention on three.

At the center of the exhibition, Isaac Julien’s “Western Union: Small Boats” (2007) was positioned amid the classical Greek architecture in the gallery’s sculpture court at the core of the 1905 Albright Building. The final installment of his expeditions trilogy, “Cast No Shadow,”⁴ the multi-channel video installation is the British experimental filmmaker’s meditation on cinema. Acquired by the Gallery in 2009, “Western Union” is a series of vignettes that serve as a meditation on Luchino Visconti’s 1963 film *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard), about the nineteenth-century Sicilian aristocracy and social upheaval, based on a novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. Julien uses iconography and choreography to explore currents of the modern African diaspora and to reconsider the Mediterranean island’s role in contemporary migration. By staging sequences in the same palatial settings used by Visconti, the artist returns to these traditional Baroque spaces representing an odyssey informed by both desire and trauma. Julien has stated that, as a work that revisits both the cinema and art history, “Western Union” serves as a conversation about architecture and how it might be repositioned in light of these new journeys.⁵

Julien uses available technology to extend the possibilities of what cinema can communicate and how it can be experienced. The synchronized triptych of images, originally captured using 35mm film, presents an enhanced panorama aided through localized sound projection. Through artful composition Julien populates the screens with bodies in motion and objects at rest: splintered piles of small boats and lifeless bodies pulled from the sea serve as counterpoints to sequences of underwater choreography or performances within ornamented interiors. Julien’s expanded *mise-en-scene* identifies the cinema and implicates the gallery as sites of globalism’s wreckage. In “Videosphere,” the work occupied a central location in the 1905 Albright Building, a structure originally designed to serve as the Fine Arts Pavilion

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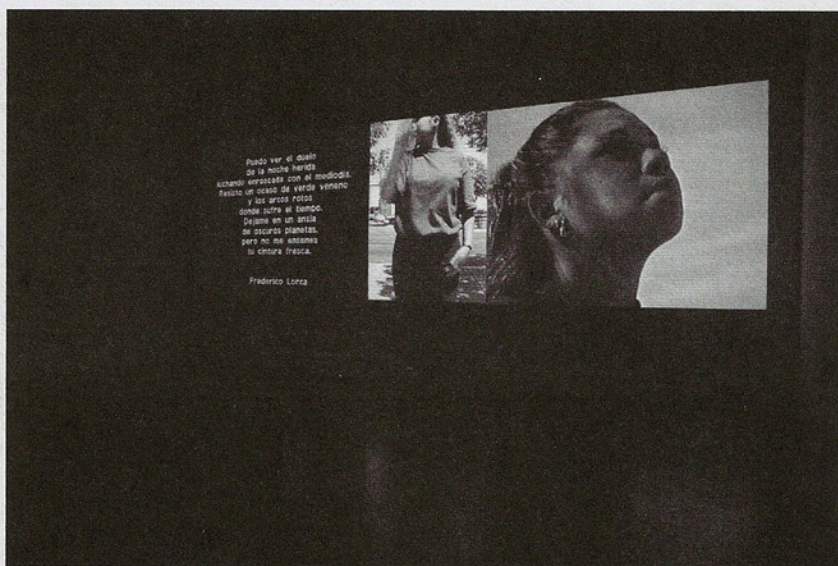
Installation view of “Western Union: Small Boats” (2007) by Isaac Julien;
© 2007 Isaac Julien; courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures; photograph
by Tom Loonan

during the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. Hughes's realization of "Western Union" not only achieved Julien's conceptual and artistic intentions; the work inhabited the space as if it were a site-specific installation designed to challenge the implications of its architecture, and through its critique, served as the closest realization of the space's original intention.⁶

Another work that achieved grandeur through the scale of its realization was "the world won't listen" (2004–07),⁷ a three-channel installation by British artist Phil Collins that served in "Videosphere" as the answer to "Tall Ships."⁸ The artist documented karaoke performances in Colombia, Turkey, and Indonesia offering participatory recreations of songs by The Smiths, the 1980s British rock band whose cult following maintains their outsider status. Installed in an open room lined with acoustic tiles, the synchronized videos were separated by partitions that effectively isolated each channel as a discrete projection without disassociating its sound from the voices of the global counterparts on the other channels. One might argue that audiences familiar with the band's distinctive jingly sound and devastating lyrics could better appreciate the work. As a literal and figurative exercise in spatialization, however, it also enables the uninitiated to experience the immersive work. Slight delays of performers who struggle to simultaneously sing and read English lyrics, and subtle variations in the instrumental versions, create unique psychoacoustic effects activated by viewers navigating the space. The results are a haunting global remix of the band's 1987 compilation of the same title, one of their last releases.

In her essay, Hughes situates "the world won't listen" within a nostalgic framework of televisual history and the rise of MTV. Collins's work clearly examines how popular culture is expressed and, through performative modes like karaoke, presents opportunities for catharsis. "Driving in your car, I never, never want to go home," a young couple croon, a backdrop of tree-lined road behind them, "Because I haven't got one—any more . . ." To walk this hall is to traverse the globe, and bear witness to culture in translation through these performances.⁹ Historicizing "the world won't listen" dislocates the work from its critique, which celebrates resistance in the face of cultural homogenization.

For an exhibition about collections, perhaps the most interesting work and most clever presentation was a digital video by painter Sarah Morris installed in the Gallery for New Media, a new space configured from the former Collector's Gallery located in the 1962 Knox addition designed by Gordon Bunshaft. Unlike the work of Julien and Collins, which consider the viewers' movements and their relationship to the space, Morris's thirty-five-minute single-channel video is an experimental documentary that, ultimately, should be viewed from beginning to end to experience the full weight of its argument. The first art commission of the National



Trust for Historic Preservation, *Points on a Line* (2010) documents the private homes of Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe (*Farnsworth House* in Illinois) and Philip Johnson (*Glass House* in Connecticut), as well as the public spaces designed by the two icons of twentieth-century design and modern architecture. Morris employs static framing to reveal details, and uses acute composition that parallels her paintings. Over time she develops a catalog of visual evidence, but ultimately she establishes an allegory in which interior and exterior spaces are presented through a fixed-paced montage set to artist Liam Gillick's minimalist score. With the accumulated documentation of these spaces and their occupants—those who use them and those who maintain them—a type of silhouette emerges, representing the architects through their absence.

At New York City's Four Seasons restaurant, Morris provides us with access to the "back of the house," where kitchen staff prepare "power lunches" for a table of businessmen, and to intimate spaces such as an unoccupied ladies lounge. Morris offers an incisive map, pointing to the places where power is exchanged, and where taste and style are performed in service to these transactions. While the film succeeds in providing the viewer an opportunity to occupy these places of power, Hughes's installation could also be understood as reflexive during the film's opening sequence, which reveals the contemporary art collection of Johnson and his partner David Whitney. The art world, as constructed by networks of power, is later evidenced by a series of close-ups displaying Rolodex cards with contact information for artists and dealers. Morris reminds us that art collections are also economic systems that rely on diversified portfolios and sound investments, and Hughes's placement of the work demonstrated the gallery's commitment to this pursuit.

Above

Installation view of "Tongue-Cut Sparrows (Inside Outside)" (1996) by James Drake; photograph by Tom Loonan

That the Albright-Knox Art Gallery did not begin to acquire “new” media art until 1993, when it purchased Nam June Paik’s “Piano Piece,” was perhaps the most startling revelation in “Videosphere.”¹⁰ Not only did the gallery have a direct connection with the most important media artists of the late twentieth century, as early as the 1970s it played a role in supporting what was then new media. In 1978 curator Linda L. Cathcart organized a major exhibition of works by Steina and Woody Vasulka, including collaborative and independent projects, and published a 63-page exhibition catalog, *The Vasulkas: Steina, Machine Vision/Woody, Descriptions*. A retrospective held this summer at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo involving many of the artists’ large-scale video installations, “Steina: Involving People into this Magic,” was a reminder of the interactive electronic artwork occurring in Buffalo.

Those more aware of the ways artists have used media both within the gallery and outside of gallery systems may have found themselves in an all-too-familiar historical terrain, abetted by the romantic musings of Gene Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* (1970) and mythologized further when Hughes summons Paik as the singular hero.¹¹ During the pioneering years, media artists actively used new technology in radical ways that have directly inspired “new media” tactics indebted to the open-source hacking culture of 1970s video artists.¹² The vast scope of works on view, however, limited the depth of analysis and restricted Hughes’s ability to fully develop the artistic lineage of “The New Pioneers.”

Given the exhibition’s subtext, to present new acquisitions and to make the case for their inclusion, Hughes was challenged to situate a diverse array of works within a socio-historical landscape for audiences new to media art, as well as for those more familiar with “the art formerly known as new media.”¹³ The exhibition was a resounding success, adding to the value of the works through skillful installations and Hughes’s often-poetic juxtapositions. But it hardly dismisses a question for many: What took the Albright-Knox so long?

Now that the gallery has aggressively begun to fill the gaps in its permanent collection, perhaps we can look forward not only to an intermingling of this work with the rest of the collection, but also to more frequent exhibitions devoted to this now-validated genre. As the gallery acquires new media works from the current generation of artists, viewers hope it will continue to keep its eye on the rearview mirror. Just when the void becomes harder to fill, the need for access to earlier media art will increase.¹⁴ With technology thrusting us faster and farther into the future, the problems associated with acquiring and maintaining earlier electronic art must not obscure their value.

CAROLYN TENNANT is a curator and archivist based in Buffalo, where she serves as Media Arts Director at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center.

NOTES 1. Holly E. Hughes, *Videosphere: A New Generation* (Buffalo: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 2011), 5. 2. Details about the sale as well as the restricted use of endowment funds can be found in its 2006–07 Annual Report, available online at www.albrightknox.org/about-ak/annual-reports/. 3. The 2007 acquisition is jointly held with the Whitney Museum of American Art. 4. Katarzyna Bojarska, “I am putting the fire underneath people,” Isaac Julien in conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska, June 18, 2009, www.obieg.pl/english/12332. 5. See “Isaac Julien on Western Small Boats,” *The Art Newspaper*, www.theartnewspaper.com/content.php?id=310. 6. Hughes’s commitment to fulfill the artists’ intentions within each installation was a goal achieved in collaboration with a team of skilled preparators, who succeeded in making invisible logistical challenges. 7. The 2008 acquisition is jointly held with the Carnegie Museum of Art. 8. Gary Hill’s “Tall Ships,” which premiered at Documenta IX in 1992, is a monumental installation requiring twelve channels consisting of black-and-white monitors, projection units, and laserdisc players. Perhaps most importantly, however, the interactive work requires a customized computer system to control playback that, triggered by the viewers’ navigation of space, presents Hill’s ghostly images throughout the corridor. Like the fabricator who builds a sculpture, throughout the history of media art but particularly within a gallery context, ghostwriters have worked to achieve the intention of the artist by crafting code and building interfaces. Several works exhibited in “Videospheres” require software and hardware interfaces to achieve a level of synchronization that, like continuity editing in narrative films, feels so natural the technology is rendered invisible. 9. The music of The Smiths and lead singer Morrissey has inspired close readings by other media artists interested in globalization and popular culture such as Is It Really So Strange?, William E. Jones’s 2004 documentary about Latino fan culture in Los Angeles. The California artist best known for his found-footage films and installations explores how the adoration of the band problematizes racial and gender stereotypes. 10. See Art V, A One-Day Symposium on Video in Buffalo, <http://experimentalcenter.org/art-v-one-day-symposium-video-buffalo-1>. 11. “His work continued to have a profound impact on artists of the later twentieth century, even affecting how their work was perceived within the museum setting. Simply put, Paik’s work elevated technology,” Hughes, 4. 12. The gallery has presented other contemporary “new” media artists like Cory Arcangel, who, raised in Buffalo, traces his early exposure to DIY media art to Squeaky Wheel. The gallery has also produced exhibitions of Canadian media performance artist Jeremy Bailey and recently acquired works by Siebren Versteeg, two artists keenly aware of how their work relates to the history of video art and its community of tool builders and hackers. 13. This expression is borrowed from “The Art Formerly Known As New Media,” an exhibition curated by Steve Dietz and Sarah Cook for the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre in fall 2005, which marked the tenth anniversary of the Banff New Media Institute. 14. Hughes discussed the development of the media arts collection over the past decade, mentioning the Gallery’s commitment to acquisitions of earlier works of media art as well as new media. (Interview with the curator, September 2, 2011.)

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